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HEADLINE: ISLAMIC FORCE IN BOSNIA MAY THREATEN U.S. TROOPS

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PODBREZJE, Bosnia-Herzegovina – On a bleak, wind-swept hilltop, bearded Arab soldiers, many in the traditional black garb of Afghan fighters, stomped their feet to ward off the bitter chill, shifted their automatic rifles and cursed the impending arrival of American soldiers.

"The American tanks do not frighten us," said a fighter, standing under a black flag covered with white Arabic script.

"We came here to die in the service of Islam. This is our duty. No infidel force will tell us how to live or what to do. This is a Muslim country, which must be defended by Muslims. We are 400 men here, and we all pray we will one day be martyrs."

With the cease-fire in Bosnia, these militantly Islamic volunteers known as mujahedeen, who fought alongside Bosnian government soldiers against Serbs and Croats for much of the war, have turned their attention to what they see as the other enemies of the faith.

They are even suspected in the shooting death last month of an American civilian employee of the United Nations.

Many of these 3,000 to 4,000 men are veterans of the war in Afghanistan and are often wanted in their own countries, linked to violent Islamic groups struggling to overthrow the governments in Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

In their zeal to enforce a militant form of Islam that most Bosnian Muslims themselves do not espouse, the fighters, distinctive in their flowing black beards, force U.N. vehicles off the road, smash bottles of

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alcohol in shop windows and warn Christian families at gunpoint to leave Bosnia.

The mujahedeen have also vowed to kill five British citizens in retaliation for the Oct. 5 killing, by British U.N. troops, of a mujahedeen fighter who pointed a loaded pistol at them.

The killing of the fighter, a Bosnian Muslim named Elvedin Hodzic who had joined the mujahedeen, is the kind of event U.N. officials say could easily trigger clashes between the Islamic militants and U.S. troops.

The British are now locked in a war of nerves with the mujahedeen troops.

Five days after the shooting, a rocket-propelled grenade was fired at a U.N. military observer team along a mountain road. The team's armored car was destroyed, but those inside escaped with slight wounds.

Two weeks later a British U.N. patrol in the town of Zavidovici was surrounded by about two dozen heavily armed mujahedeen who threatened to kill the soldiers until Bosnian government troops intervened.

On Nov. 18, William Jefferson, a native of Camden, N.J., employed by the United Nations, was found shot twice in the head near Banovici. U.N. officials strongly suspect that he was killed by the mujahedeen, who may have taken him for British.

Most British aid workers, whose homes have been attacked and spray-painted with Arabic slogans, have left Zenica. The few who remain ride in unmarked convoys, change their routes and never go out at night. And the British Overseas Development Administration office in Zenica has placed armed guards out front and removed its signs.

"This is worse psychologically than the shelling," said Fred Yallop, the administration director.

The clash with the British has also pointed out to many aid workers the strength of the mujahedeen and the weakness of the local authorities.

"The problem," a U.N. official said, "is that the local authorities have no control over the mujahedeen. The mujahedeen are protected by the highest levels of the Bosnian government. They operate with total impunity. We do not know who controls them, perhaps no one."

Many mujahedeen fighters carry Bosnian identity cards and passports, although they often do not speak the language. And Western aid workers who report the frequent theft of jeeps and vehicles by mujahedeen troops

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say the Bosnian police are powerless to enter their camps to retrieve the vehicles.

"We see them drive by in vehicles that were stolen from international organizations and the U.N.," said a British aid worker, who asked to remain unidentified.

The mujahedeen here are based in a four-story yellow building that was once a factory in the village of Podbrezje, three miles north of Zenica, in what would be the American sector of Bosnia, and they are among the Muslim volunteers who came to Bosnia shortly after the war started in 1992.

The fighters are revered in the Arab world, and videotapes that extol their bravery are sold on street corners from Aden to Cairo.

The mujahedeen served as shock troops for the Bosnian army and have suffered severe casualties in frontal assaults on Serbian and Croatian positions. All view the West, despite the scheduled deployment of some 60,000 NATO-led troops, as an enemy of the faith they have vowed to give their lives defending.

"The American soldiers will be just like the U.N. soldiers," said a fighter wearing green combat fatigues and speaking in heavily accented Persian Gulf Arabic.

"They will corrupt the Muslims here, bring in drugs and prostitution. They will destroy all the work we have done to bring the Bosnians back to true Islam. The Americans are wrong if they think we will stand by and watch them do this."

The Bosnian-Croat Catholics who live near this mujahedeen camp, one of about 10 in Bosnia, have suffered some of the worst harassment. Many have been beaten by mujahedeen fighters and robbed at gunpoint. More than half of the Catholic families in this village have been driven from their homes. When they flee, their houses are promptly seized by the Islamic militiamen.

Jazo Milanovic and his wife, Ivka, sat huddled by their wood stove one recent evening waiting for the police. At the house of their next-door neighbor, mujahedeen fighters were carting out household items. The fighters would finish their looting before the police arrived.

"They walk in and take what they want," the 68-year-old farmer said, "and the one time I protested to them they fired a burst over my head."

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The bullet holes are still in the wall. We will all be forced out soon."

But it is not just the mujahedeen who have gained a foothold in Bosnia.

There are at least 10 Islamic charities in Zenica, including one run by the Iranian government, that many Western governments view with deep suspicion.

The charities have budgets in the tens of millions of dollars and work to build militant grass-roots organizations in Bosnia.

Human Relief International, an Egyptian foundation that is outlawed in Egypt, is one such group.

The 40 Egyptians who work for the charity in Bosnia are all wanted in Egypt on terrorism charges. Western diplomats and U.N. officials say the charities, along with the mujahedeen, have combined to create a powerful militant Islamic force in Bosnia that could be inimical to U.S.

interests here.

"We are all code red," said Aiman Elhamalaway, who works for the Egyptian charity. "If we ever go back to Egypt, which we will not, our names come up bright red on a computer so the police know we should be immediately arrested."

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